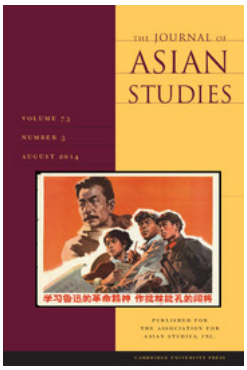
The Journal of Asian Studies

http://journals.cambridge.org/JAS

Additional services for ***The Journal of Asian Studies:***

Email alerts: Click here
Subscriptions: Click here
Commercial reprints: Click here
Terms of use : Click here



Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste. By Christophe Jaffrelot. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. xiii, 205 pp. \$39.50 (cloth).

Gail Omvedt

The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 65 / Issue 02 / May 2006, pp 438 - 440
DOI: 10.1017/S0021911806000957, Published online: 02 March 2007

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021911806000957

How to cite this article:
Gail Omvedt (2006). The Journal of Asian Studies, 65, pp 438-440 doi:10.1017/S0021911806000957

Request Permissions : Click here

CAMBRIDGE JOURNALS

Downloaded from http://journals.cambridge.org/JAS, IP address: 202.41.10.30 on 31 Oct 2014

tural monuments he commissioned and the descriptions he compiled of languages, many of which are today extinct.

Confined for the most part to the Kathmandu Valley, Hodgson relied on a corps of Nepalese to collect his data, ranging from the Newar scholar Amritananda, who collected and interpreted the Buddhist manuscripts, to hunters who brought him specimens (9,512 birds, for example, representing 672 species of which 124 were new to science) and who provided him with detailed observations of bird behavior. Hodgson trained a number of talented Nepali artists to paint and draw birds and mammals as well as buildings and monuments with great scientific fidelity; little is known about most of them. He was "the first person to describe the geographical distribution of the mammals and birds of the Himalayas" (p. 136) and was an important figure in creating the field of Indian ornithology. Despite his contributions, however, he had little support for his endeavors from the scientific establishment in England. He published mostly in Indian journals that were not readily available in Britain, so while he was well-known and esteemed in scientific circles in India, he was marginal in the scientific community at home.

There exist only two other books that discuss Hodgson's life and work: W. W. Hunter's biography, originally published in 1896, and a discussion of Hodgson as an ornithologist by Mark Cocker and Carol Inskipp (1988). This volume makes the life and work of one of the most remarkable Englishmen to work in the subcontinent accessible to scholars and will be of interest to a very diverse readership—as diverse, in fact, as Hodgson's own interests. The contributions are all uniformly good, and some are outstanding in their ability to place him in his context and illuminate the workings of colonial forms of knowledge. There are three biographical chapters that give an overview of his life, his political work as British Resident, and insights into his personal life in Kathmandu; two contributions discussing his study of Buddhism (with an essay by Hodgson on architectural illustration of Buddhist monuments as an appendix); three on Hodgson's contributions to zoology; one that discusses Hodgson's relationship with Joseph Hooker; and two chapters that assess Hodgson's contributions to linguistics and ethnology. The final chapter introduces a complete bibliography of his works. The book is profusely illustrated throughout, mostly with the black-and-white illustrations that Hodgson himself commissioned, and there are sixteen color plates showcasing the work of his Nepali artists. This no doubt contributes to the book's price, which, unfortunately, is likely to put it beyond the reach of most individual scholars and beyond the reach even of institutional libraries in the Himalayan region, where it most deserves to be. This volume is an excellent and valuable contribution to our understanding of the praxis of colonial knowledge formation and deserves to be widely read.

ARJUN GUNERATNE
Macalester College

Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste. By CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. xiii, 205 pp. $39.50 (cloth).

B. R. Ambedkar has never really been taken seriously as a thinker in India. More general political and theoretical studies may focus on Gandhi and Nehru, but except for a stray article here and there by economists, Ambedkar has been taken at most as

a symbol and a political leader. This brief book by French social scientist Christophe Jaffrelot is an important beginning in remedying the situation.

Jaffrelot's discussion of Ambedkar's conflict with Gandhi (and the reaction to him of Gandhians) is useful, and his chapter on Ambedkar's role in the making of the constitution is unequaled, not simply for his refutation of Arun Shourie's vitriolic view but also because it shows how Ambedkar could use his position both to hold back overenthusiastic socialists and prevent Gandhians from a backward, decentralized *panchayati raj* political structure. Ambedkar was irrevocably and without apologies a modernist, with much more in common in the end with Nehru than with Gandhi.

However, while Jaffelot emphasizes Ambedkar's political pragmatism, this misses the element of vision in his overall policy. Ambedkar had a complex, almost love-hate relationship with Marxism. He genuinely was drawn to the notion of a classless and egalitarian society and was for a time influenced by Marxist economic notions (which led him to proposals like "nationalism of land" and "state socialism"); however, he was equally antagonized by the left's neglect of caste and cultural issues. Marxism offered, indeed, an all-encompassing doctrine with an orientation to the poor and exploited that held both an emotional and intellectual attraction for Dalits; their temptation was to accept Marxist economic analysis and seek only to *add* caste (or race or gender) to the class theory. Ambedkar had to shake himself loose of this framework at the theoretical as well as political level, and he did so in the end by turning to John Dewey and the democratic aspect of social democracy.

The major strategic question faced by Ambedkar was how the ex-untouchables, an extremely poor and uneducated minority, could develop as a political force with alliances that would provide them some clout without being overwhelmed and ignored on a broader front. Here he had to deal with three major issues—nationalism, class, and the role of the larger non-Brahman or former *shudra* groups. Jaffrelot takes this up theoretically in terms of Ambedkar's analysis of caste. He argues that Ambedkar ethnicized the caste issue by endowing the ex-untouchables with a distinct and prestigious identity that could see them as a ruling community in a kind of golden age of the past, degraded because they remained Buddhists. This gave them a sense of pride but at the same time distinguished them from the *shudra*s, who were left within a Sanskritizing framework.

But there were subtleties, even ambiguities, in Ambedkar's position here. At a surface level ethnicization did leave a *shudra*-untouchable distinction that fit the reality Ambedkar faced in his day, when non-Brahmans were almost all claiming a Ksatriya-Aryan identity, while Dalits throughout India were continuing to see themselves as non-Aryans. The themes were old ones, going back to Phule in the nineteenth century and continuing today. However, at another level, in contradiction to common non-Aryan interpretations, Ambedkar emphatically denied the racial interpretation of caste, and even *Who were the shudras?* ended by declaring that while the *shudra* category was established when a section of Ksatriyas were denied the Aryan initiation, it was filled by the masses of non-Aryan peoples. Ambedkar in fact was trying to have it both ways and never completely gave up hoping to work with a broader "backward caste" group. Jaffrelot is right, though, in arguing that it ceased being a major part of his strategy.

The working class as a whole represented another potential broad alliance. When Jaffrelot argues in his conclusion that Ambedkar "never found a clear-cut and definitive answer" to the question of whether untouchables could be integrated into Hindu society through alliances, he cites the role of class in Ambedkar's thinking, arguing that it persisted as a means of integration. But this points to a major unresolved issue:

why should class point to *Hindu* society—unless it was because the major sections of the working class and their socialist-Communist leaders continued to identify themselves as Hindus? This was precisely the problem that Ambedkar faced. No real alliance could be built with either non-Brahmans as a group or workers as a class unless their identity could be built on a non-Hindu or rather anticaste basis—the failure to do this was the most spectacular failure of the left and of non-Brahman leaders in colonial India.

Jaffrelot finishes by noting that Ambedkar is today "at the heart of the contest for public space" and a "symbol of confrontation between the lower castes and the upper castes" (p. 165). The ambiguity that Ambedkar had to deal with lies here: who indeed are "upper" and "lower" in the complex, graded hierarchy that Indian caste represents? Current violence against Dalits is largely at the hands of the ex-*shudra*s known today as "other backward castes," and these continue to identify largely with upper-caste Hindus. Yet power and wealth in social institutions continues to largely exclude the OBCs as well: with whom, then, and how should Dalits ally? This question—indeed, all those questions Jaffrelot deals with in this fascinating study—remains important for political activists today as Indians grapple with their ongoing dilemmas of caste and community.

GAIL OMVEDT
District Sangli, Maharashtra

Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India. By SANJAY JOSHI. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. ix, 209 pp. $45.00 (cloth); 2005, $19.95 (paper).

In his lucidly written book, Sanjay Joshi accounts for the rise, growth, and preeminence of a new social group that comprised the middle class in the city of Lucknow. Joshi observes fairly early in the text that the birth and prominence of this new middle class was predicated upon their ability to successfully render marginal earlier elite constellations in Lucknow society, the scions of a Nawabi political culture. The strength of this new middle class also depended on their capacity to block the lower orders of society from participating in the public sphere. Thus, middle-class rhetoric was constituted by a degree of prejudice against both the nobility and the underclasses. Joshi notes, "Whereas the middle class activists borrowed heavily from western Enlightenment ideas as they sought to marginalize the traditional elites of the city, their exclusion of the lower classes was based on much more traditional hierarchies" (p. 24). Such contradictions, however, "were inevitable to the construction of the middle class, and both enabled as well as limited its agenda" (p. 24). Much of Joshi's text is devoted to an exploration of precisely these contradictions, manifest in middle-class articulations of domesticity and the role of women, their pronouncements on religion, the meaning of respectability, the espousal of classical liberal values, and, related to the last their stance on colonial rule.

In practice this meant that the middle class championed notions of egalitarianism, hard work, discipline, and frugality in their attempt to distinguish themselves from—as well as undermine—the precolonial elite. However, they switched to a rhetoric of the inborn superiority of some groups over others, to ideals about the hierarchical ordering of society when it came to the lower orders. It was via newspapers and civic associations that the middle classes aired their views about society and operated in